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Statement submitted by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations: HelpAge International, AARP, International Council of Psychologists, International Federation on Ageing, European Federation for the Welfare of the Elderly and International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Implementation of key international commitments and goals on gender inequality in relation to older women

This statement focuses on the extent to which older women and ageing have been taken into account in the implementation of key international commitments and goals on gender inequality. Ageing and discrimination against older women are rarely considered, and it is imperative to respond to the gender implications of population ageing if gender inequality is to be adequately addressed. The statement contains recommendations for action to take this forward.

The century of ageing: The twenty-first century is the century of ageing. Populations are ageing at an unprecedented rate: the proportion of older people is predicted to rise globally from 760 million today (11 per cent of the population) to almost 2 billion by 2050 (22 per cent of the population). By 2045, there will be more people over the age of 60 than children under 15. While already well advanced in some developed countries, population ageing is occurring most rapidly in developing countries.

Women and ageing: While global statistics mask the very different contexts in which older women live, they do serve to illustrate the gendered nature of ageing. More older women than older men live alone; 19 per cent of older women compared to 9 per cent of older men live on their own. Although for some older women, this may be a lifestyle choice, for others, it can lead to isolation and become a barrier to accessing support and services. Similarly, 80 per cent of men over 60 are married compared to only 48 per cent of older women. There are more women living into their 80s and beyond: while there are 83 men for every 100 women at the age of 60, there are only 59 men for every 100 women at the age of 80.

Older women and gender equality: Men and women experience ageing differently. Both experience discrimination based on old age but, for older women, this can be exacerbated by a lifetime of gender-based discrimination, poverty and working in poorly paid jobs, with little access to formal social security to provide a regular income in old age.

Older women are not a homogeneous group: The discrimination older women experience is often intersectional, their old age compounding other forms of discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin, disability, marital status, levels of poverty or literacy. Often considered no longer economically or reproductively useful, many older women are seen as a burden on their families and communities, and are marginalized, isolated or even abandoned. Despite this, older women's contribution to society — as carers, advisers, mediators and breadwinners — is invaluable.

Older women and the internationally agreed commitments and goals: Demographic ageing is having a profound effect on the society in which we live. Policies across all sectors need to respond to its implications, including those related to gender equality. However, the internationally agreed goals and commitments are largely silent regarding older women and the implementation of those that do address older women has been inconsistent at best.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action addresses older women's poverty, health, the violence perpetrated against them, obstacles to entering the job market, vulnerability in armed conflict, and discrimination at work. However, a review of 121 national responses to a questionnaire for the Beijing+15 review showed patchy and inconsistent recognition of, and attention to, older women. Attention to old women was greatest in descriptions of measures to reduce women's poverty with 30 of the countries including broader information on social security (pensions) and other social protection measures for older women or older people. There was general recognition that women are more at risk of poverty in old age than men, but only five countries provided poverty data that was disaggregated by age and sex. Older women's health was mentioned in only 19 of the responses reviewed. A similar picture emerges on violence against older women. Older women remain invisible in responses to violence against women, with only four countries mentioning violence against older women. Only 11 of the 121 responses reviewed included measures to encourage and support employment of older women, despite the fact that 40 per cent of women over 60 in the least developed countries are in the labour force, the majority of whom are likely to be in the informal sector.

What was particularly noticeable was the lack of data disaggregated by age and sex. Only two countries reviewed recognized the lack of such data as a problem and only one made a commitment to collect it. A questionnaire of this nature cannot cover every Government action aimed at empowering and advancing women. What it does tell us, however, is that older women are a low priority for most countries and that Governments have a long way to go to meet their commitments under Beijing towards older women. Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, at a time when populations have already aged considerably in some countries and are ageing rapidly in others, only six responses reviewed recognized ageing and its impact on women as a future priority.

Millennium Development Goals: While the Millennium Development Goals have provided an important platform for gathering support from the donor community for development, they are not without their problems. Like the majority of development interventions, the Goals are completely "age-blind". They are also completely silent on the issue of ageing and gender inequality. This is reflected in the way the Goal indicators, against which progress is measured, are not disaggregated by age, for example the poverty and hunger indicators for Goal 1. Others focus on younger people only, for example, HIV prevalence rates only being measured up to the age of 24 in Goal 6. Goals 3 and 5 do little to address the gender inequality that older women experience. If the Millennium Development Goals are to deliver fair and equitable development that reaches the very poorest and takes gender inequality throughout the life course into account, they can no longer ignore the unprecedented demographic change that is presently taking place.

Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008): In terms of gender equality in times of conflict, neither resolution 1325 (2000) nor resolution 1820 (2008) mention older women and their specific vulnerabilities in armed conflict and in relation to sexual violence in war, or their potential contributions to peacebuilding.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: With 186 States parties, the Convention provides commitments on gender

equality that apply to all women regardless of age and throughout their lives, which are legally binding nearly all over the world.

In its decision 26/III (2002) entitled "Ending discrimination against older women through the Convention", the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which monitors the implementation of the Convention, recognized that the Convention is an important tool for addressing the specific issue of the human rights of older women. In particular, the Committee recognized that discrimination against women throughout their lifespan has a severe and compounded impact on women in old age. It recognized the lack of statistical data disaggregated by age and sex, including on the incidence of poverty and violence against older women, and the need to improve older women's economic, physical, mental and social well-being, as well as their participation in society.

Despite this, attention to the rights of older women has been disappointing in both States parties' reports and in the Committee's concluding observations. In the eight years between 1998 and 2006, there were just 33 references to older women in concluding observations. However, this has increased significantly since 2007, with 33 references between 2007 and the conclusion of the first Committee session in 2010. In particular, the ongoing process of drafting a general recommendation on the rights of older women has encouraged the Committee to request information on older women from reporting States parties when none has been given.

When adopted, it is hoped that the general recommendation on older women's rights will outline the obligations assumed by States parties from the perspective of ageing and provide guidance to both State parties and non-governmental organizations on the inclusion of older women's rights in their implementation of and reporting on the Convention.

Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002: On its adoption, the Plan of Action was described by Kofi Annan as a bold new agenda for handling the issues of ageing in the twenty-first century, and he noted that it was the first time Governments agreed to link questions of ageing to other frameworks for social and economic development and human rights. In the accompanying Political Declaration, Governments recognized the need to mainstream a gender perspective into all policies and programmes to take account of the needs and experiences of older women and men. However, as the above analysis of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women shows, there is little evidence of this linking of ageing to frameworks to promote gender equality and social and economic development.

Recommendations: The creation of a new United Nations gender entity, the forthcoming reviews of the Millennium Development Goals and of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, and the new general recommendation of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women provide opportunities to improve the implementation of international commitments and goals on gender equality in relation to older women:

- An overarching prerequisite is recognition and acceptance that the world is ageing at an unprecedented rate and that this has profound implications in every sector. Improved data disaggregation by age and sex is key to understanding what these implications are and how best to respond to them.

- The setting up of a new United Nations gender entity provides an opportunity to place greater focus on gender and ageing from the outset. Including gender and ageing in the three proposed divisions of the new gender entity at headquarters level (intergovernmental support and strategic partnership, programme and policy, and operations) is also critical to ensure the response of the United Nations to gender inequality reflects changing population structures. This could be done through dedicated staff on gender and ageing. Gender and ageing also need to be taken into account across all the functions of the new entity, and explicit attention needs to be given to gender and ageing in all the intergovernmental agreements that will be monitored by the new gender entity.

- Gender equality must be a key part of the national 10-year reviews of implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, which will culminate in the global review at the Commission for Social Development in 2013.

- Ageing and its gender implications must be central to the review of the Millennium Development Goals and the post-Goal debate to determine a new development paradigm based on human rights, social justice and equality.

- The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should systematically ask all reporting States parties to provide information on how they are implementing the Convention in relation to older women.